



ERIE COUNTY LEGISLATURE

HON. JOSEPH C. LORIGO

10TH DISTRICT LEGISLATOR

MAJORITY LEADER

May 23rd, 2014

Dear Mr. Poloncarz:

Approximately two weeks ago, I awoke to a news report about a senior citizen that has learned to enjoy life again after a terrible six month ordeal that can best be described as torture at the hands of her brother. In response, I have called for the formation of a committee of legislators to investigate the system that failed this woman and numerous others in the past. Two weeks later, I awake to another news report alleging another system failure within our Department of Social Services. Unfortunately, this time the story involved the tragic death of a child

As public servants, we have a responsibility to serve our constituents well. That responsibility increases immensely when we are serving those who are unable to serve themselves. As a Legislator, I am embarrassed to have to write these words, but I must. The most vulnerable among us are facing deplorable conditions and the "best efforts" the Department of Social Services has put forward have not helped the situation. This is unacceptable and must be corrected.

The Legislature and Administration have worked together several times in an attempt to curb this terrible trend. Before I arrived in County government, the Division of Adult Protective Services was transferred from the Department of Senior Services and placed under the direction of Social Services. They were supposed to be better equipped in handling the caseloads and serving the public. Since Social Services has been almost entirely responsible for managing the welfare of our most vulnerable constituents, several other organizational changes have been put in place in an attempt to stop unnecessary deaths. People have been fired, caseworkers have been added, and more managers and senior administration officials have been added to help.

I'm at a loss for how we are measuring the success or failure of our organizational changes within the department. Last year, I was adamant about supporting a proposal that added 10 caseworkers to the Division of Child Protective Services. The Administration lobbied hard and ultimately got their request of a lesser amount of caseworkers, while hiring additional top-level managers. It is becoming incredibly clear to me that my efforts in fighting for more caseworkers instead of more managers was the right thing to do. I don't think it's too late to right that wrong.

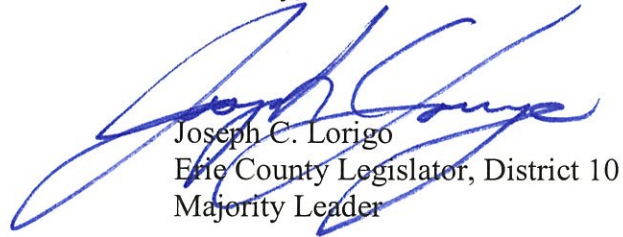
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I want to be very clear: The constant failures of the Department of Social Services warrant new management, not additional management. I have grown tired of the excuses and legal references as to why the Commissioner and her senior staff can't talk to the Legislature about these issues. If I am going to accept the premise that we are unable to talk about the specific issues surrounding these tragic failures that have cost innocent children their lives, let's change the course of the conversation to something that is well within the right of the Legislature to discuss: It is to change the Department's leadership. The Department of Social Services has been given significant resources to improve their organization and they have not. Social Services needs new management, and Commissioner Carol Dankert-Mauer has proven herself ineffective and should resign immediately.

We should work together to identify a qualified candidate to lead the department. We should also be open to a national search, a higher salary and the approval of bridge funding to effectuate the change in leadership and organizational structure. It is my understanding that Mrs. Dankert-Mauer has a term that was given to her by a previous County Executive and Legislature. For the good of this community, let's not be a roadblock to necessary reform.

Sincerely,



Joseph C. Lorigo
Erie County Legislator, District 10
Majority Leader